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Transgender people and sports

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Abstract

The essence of sport and fair play is predicated on the assumption that individuals must fall in with one of the preordained categories of female or male. To compete as an athlete, individuals must align themselves as female or male and join the corresponding team. This is not a difficult task for a cisgender person but a transgender one is inevitably going to face unique challenges posed by this binary or dualistic view of sex.

This paper considers the precarious situation of transgender athletes and their extraordinary body self-narratives. I review sport policies and the enforcement of the woman's and man's category in sport. I present the barriers and facilitators of physical activity and sport participation among young, transitioning adults. Finally, I would like to muse over the ethis of inclusion of transgender and intersex athletes into a mainstream sport and I discuss whether and on which conditions should transwomen be permitted in female categories in sports.

Keywords: transgender, intersex, gender, inclusion, sport

Gender and sex

In the 1970s feminists and sexologists started to argue that sex and gender were two different things. They discussed that apart from women's and men's bodies different reproductive functions there were few other sex differences between men and women. If girls experienced problems with learning mathematics and boys had problems with learning foreign languages that was not a product of sex differences between their brains. Their difficulties resulted from different expectations laid on boys and girls in our society [9].

Sex refers to the biological and physiological attributes that typically distinguish females from males, whereas gender is a cultural and social construction reflecting in the differential self - identities, behaviors and roles associated culturally with biological sex [10,11]. The term "sex" includes such characteristics as: chromosomes (XX or XY), hormones (especially estrogen and testosterone), external and internal reproductive organs (testes, penis, vagina, uterus, ovaries, labia) and secondary sex attributes (facial and body hair, breasts, menstruation).

Gender is distinct from sex and is traditionally described as the result of culture, social institutions and learned behavior. According to this approach, gender is a social construct and a product of nurture whereas sex is a product of nature. American Psychological Association describes gender as a concept referring to the attitudes, feelings and behaviors that a given culture associates with a person's biological sex [12], whereas sex is defined by biological aspects of maleness or femaleness [13].

There are only two sex and gender options recognized in western societies – one can be either male or a female. In different cultures being a man or a woman may mean different things. In western societies masculinity is described by traits like: activity, strength, aggression, linear thinking, stoicism, steadfastness whereas femininity is connected with traits like: passiveness, weakness, emotionality, indecisiveness, ability to connect to other people and nurture them. The categories of masculinity and femininity are culturally constructed and reinforced on every step of one's life. People's behaviours that are compatible with cultural expectations are viewed as gender normative (e.g. a woman nurturing a baby) and reinforced by society, while behaviours that are viewed as incompatible with these expectations (e.g. a woman deciding not to have children) represent gender nonconformity [12] and are usually frowned upon.

Gender belief system of every society can be described by assessing their attitudes towards roles of women and men, depictions of both sexes in media and gender stereotypes. However, a number of studies have indicated changes in attitudes toward the roles and responsibilities of both genders. Categories of masculinity and femininity have significantly shifted over years. Still, our society is bound by the sex and gender binary. People tend to view women and men as the opposites and the idea of dividing people in two neat categories seems to be irresistible. We are so engrossed into notion that sex precedes gender that we start gendering foetuses during pregnancy – when we see male genitalia on ultrasound, we assume the child will be a man and vice versa. Children are routinely assigned a gender at birth and those who are born with ambiguous genitals have their gender chosen by parents or doctors. During first two years of their lives children acquire concepts of gender in their cultures, they "learn to move, speak, dress, and behave in the way the culture deems appropriate for a male or female" [11] and finally start viewing themselves as female or male.

Queer versus gender

It is important to mention definitions of gender expression, gender identity and genderqueer at the beginning of this chapter as these terms are inseparably connected with being either cisgender or transgender. In its "Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Clients" American Psychological Association defines gender expression as a "way in which a person acts to communicate gender within a given culture; for example, in terms of clothing, communication patterns and interests. A person's gender expression may or may not be consistent with socially prescribed gender roles, and may or may not reflect his or her gender identity"[14, p. 28]. The way a person chooses to present himself or herself and behave (e.g. move, speak, dress, act) expresses one's gender and gender role.

Gender identity refers to "A person's deeply felt, inherent sense of being a boy, a man, or male; a girl, a woman, or female; or an alternative gender (e.g., genderqueer, gender nonconforming, gender neutral) that may or may not correspond to a person's sex assigned at birth or to a person's primary or secondary sex characteristics" [15]. One cannot deduce another person's gender identity simply by the way the person dresses, moves or looks. Although gender identity is not visible to other people, we must remember about the influence of cultural, societal, interpersonal factors on gender identity's development [13].

When person's sex, gender identity and gender expression align, we describe him or her as a cisgender man or a cisgender woman. If someone's sex, gender identity and gender expression do not match, we must look for other words to let that person describe themselves. Generally, we can apply a word "queer" for individuals whose sexual orientation/gender identity/ gender expression does not conform to dominant norms in the society. Most LGBT members embrace this label as neutral or positive. Some of gender non-conforming people may embrace queer identity in order to avoid limiting themselves to gender binaries [16]. A person whose gender identity does not fit into gender binary, who cannot and does not want to identify with any gender or with both genders, can be described with a term "genderqueer". What is more "genderqueers may also use the term "gender fluid" as an identifier but typically reject the term *transgender* because it implies a change from one gender category to another" [12]. At the same time genderqueers may express themselves as bigender/pangender/androgyne (both man and a woman), genderless/gender neutral/agender (neither man or a woman), genderfluid (moving between genders) or as a third gender [15]. The last term I would like to mention here is an adjective "transgender" describing "persons who do not feel like they fit into a dichotomous sex structure through which they are identified as male or female. Individuals in this category may feel as if they are in the wrong gender, but this perception may not correlate with a desire for surgical or hormonal reassignment" [17]. Mayer at al. defines transgender as "an inclusive term to describe people who have gender identities, expressions, or behaviors not traditionally associated with their birth sex" [18, p. 990] and Jones at al. emphasize the incongruence between the gender assigned at birth and gender identity that transgender persons experience [2]. It is worth mentioning that while some transgender persons choose to transition socially (express their gender socially at school, work etc.), others may wish to additionally transition with hormones and gender-confirming surgeries [1].

Transgender person's life

Researchers have found out that the number of people coming out as transgender in recent years in European countries has inflated substantially [3] probably due to an increased visibility of transgender people in the western world [5]. When famous athletes, actresses, models, directors like Caitlyn Jenner, Laverne Cox, Chaz Bono, Lana Wachowski, Lilly Wachowski, Balian Buschbaum, Fallon Fox or other celebrities decide to transition in the public eye, they set an example for the rest of the people questioning their gender identity [4].

Once we move our focus from Western societies to the rest of the world, we discover the proliferation of the new queer identities like the Indonesian waria, Brazilian travesty and Thai tom-dee [19], the contemporary form of traditional Thailand's kathoey culture, Indian hijra community, Native American two spirit people, Mexican muxe, Hawaian Mahu, Polynesian fa'afafine or sworn virgins of the Balkans. Exploring the histories of queer cultures beyond the west ones and introducing their narratives to a wider audience seems to be crucial for western sport's organizations and Olympic committees to understand the complexity of gender identities' phenomenon.

While in some cultures transgender persons have been traditionally recognized as a vital part of their communities, the times of European colonization have severely damaged their traditions and imposed their homophobia (and other prejudices) on the forcefully assimilated nations. Nowadays, transgender persons are vastly discriminated and in need of anti-discrimination legal protections [20]. The transgender persons face employment and promotion disparities based on their gender identity or expression [21] and they can also face discrimination at hands of medical professionals linked to stigma, prejudice and denial of their rights [22]. Transgender youth very often experience gender-related bullying [23] – they can be physically assaulted or sexually harassed at schools due to their gender expression. As a result, the statistics show that 45% of transgender and non-conforming gender aged 18-44 has attempted to commit suicide at least once in their lives [24].

Transgender individuals might avoid situations that are threatening to them and their identities, including everyday activities such as using public toilets, gyms or changing rooms, going to swimming pools, sunbathing on beaches etc. All these situations are inseparably interwind with the possibility of being outed as a trans person [6]. It seems that transgender school and university students find themselves in a particularly vulnerable position. According to Fundacja-Transfuzja's and Gdańsk University's report [25] not all toilets at schools are unisex – usually transgender pupils need to figure out "the bathroom problem" on their own, which can lead in some situations to avoiding using public toilets and experiencing urinary tract infections. Another example of Polish education system's indifference to transgender youth's needs is the matter of physical education classes – some teachers assume that as long as secondary sex attributes are unnoticeable their transgender pupils can take part in trainings without any hindrance (the aforementioned hindrance occurs once a queer teenager enters puberty); in some schools teachers do not see any reasons for introducing

transgender-friendly policies during physical education classes; very often PE teachers accept long-term sick notes excusing students from their lessons [25]. The fact that transgender youth and adults will quit training during PE lesson, at gym fitness, in swimming pools etc. in order to avoid being looked down is outrageous. Research shows that participating in sports is a crucial factor in the prevalence of depression and anxiety in transgender persons [7] and highly contributes to maintaining weight during preparation for gender-confirming procedures in those who wish to transition surgically [8], which is why we should make creating physical activities facilities inclusive for all people our top priority.

A transgender sportperson

Modern sport was developed as a mean of preventing boys from the detrimental influence of schools (i.e. emasculation) [27] and was in no way an activity suitable for women. In XX century public opinion swayed in favour of women playing sports, however there were some physical activities appropriate only for men (sports including physical contact, aggression, domination) or women (sports including little physical contact, not too much aggression and allowing athletes to stay feminine) [28]. The very essence of XX century sport was based on the assumption that people can be segregated in two categories of men and women and that men had significant biological advantage over women in sports. If one wanted to compete as an athlete, he or she needed to pick a gender team and for most people the decision-making process was a no brainer. Nonetheless, transgender individuals were challenged by sex and gender binary imposed by sports organisations.

The sex/gender anxiety concerning athletes' eligibility to compete in women's competitions has been present among athletes, spectators, medical professionals and sport organisations since the 1930s when „sex/gender/feminity tests" were discussed at first [30]. In the 1960s female athletes were examined visually and gynaecologically during competitions by members of the International Association of Athletics Federations. Since 1968 competitors in women's games had to undergo chromosomal testing which, due to ambiguity of its results, was abandoned before the 2000 Summer Olympics [31].

The noble notion of fair-play competition used to be an alibi for sex testing female athletes and to be fair is still used during disputes about perceived athletic advantage of transgender participants. It is a common belief and fear among sport organisations, female athletes and spectators that men might try to pass as women in sports competitions in order to achieve

victory [31]. What is more, despite the scarcity of reliable research exploring the influence of androgenic hormones (especially testosterone) on physical achievements of cisgender and transgender competitors, people show complete conviction that androgenic hormones ensure positive results in competitive sport. Therefore, once it comes to question whether to allow transgender athletes to compete in accordance with their gender identity, the sport organisations (including Olympic Committees) opt to give transgender men a free pass and transgender women a red flag. The aforementioned bias and inconsistency result from the perceived advantage of transgender women due to their high endogenous testosterone levels and perceived disadvantage of transgender men due to their low endogenous testosterone levels (in spite the fact of being injected with testosterone during their transition) [32]. Along this line of reasoning the International Olympic Committee allowed transgender athletes in 2004 to take part in all future Olympic games on condition that they had been prescribed cross-sex hormone treatment for 2 years and undergone gender-confirming surgery [33]. In 2016 the International Olympic Committee allowed transgender sportsmen to participate in male category without any restrictions and put some restrictions on transgender female participants. According to 2016 IOC regulations transgender sportswomen could participate in the female category as long as they had declared their gender as female at least four years prior to competition's date and their testosterone levels were below 10 nanomols per litre for as least 12 months before the competition [34]. Each case was supposed to be reviewed individually and unless transgender women could meet the IOC's criteria, they would be allowed to compete in male category. The latest Olympic policies are a great step forward but they seem to lack evidence-based research (especially when it comes to testosterone levels) and miss the experience of transgender athletes who do not wish to transition medically (because of personal, medical or cultural reasons) but choose to express their gender in non-conforming ways.

There has been a visible progress in addressing transgender (and queer) issues in sports in the last few years – the number of LGBT athletes coming out at young age has increased, the awareness of LGBT issues among young coaches has grown, heterosexual teammates and young athletes' parents are getting more tolerant and supportive of transgender identities, some organizations and internet sites (outsports.com) are focused on providing information, addressing queer issues in sports and making sports move inclusive, a few mainstream sport governing organizations (National Collegiate Athletic Association) offer educational

programs and promote inclusion of LGBT persons in sports, finally the number of social science's researchers contributing to our knowledge of queer persons in sports and the number of heterosexual male athletes speaking out against LGBT discrimination is constantly growing [26]. Nevertheless, there are still plenty of issues that need to be addressed as soon as possible, for example, school sports' accessibility to transgender teenagers. Despite many efforts to bring attention to transgender students in high schools, colleges and universities, the issues of transgender youth playing sports has not been thoroughly covered yet. The majority of high school and university's athletic programmes have no policies of transgender student athletes' inclusion in their programmes. There is no way to facilitate transgender students' interest in playing school sports unless teachers/coaches recognize the unique needs of transgender students such as: using proper names and pronoun when referring to a person, creating cloakrooms for these students to change their clothes before practice and designating showers/bathrooms for a transgender individual to use [29].

We must remember that sport reflects and informs society's gender beliefs, prejudices and practices. If the society celebrates traditional gender norms and the concept of hegemonic masculinity, and in addition ostracizes gender non-conformity, then it should come to no surprise that sport reinforces traditional gender norms, homophobia or transphobia. As one of the authors cited in my article mentioned: "Much of the progress in eliminating homophobia and transphobia in sports is a reflection of broader social change. The visibility of LGBT issues and people has increased greatly since the 1980's. Not only are LGBT people publicly out in all professions and in the mainstream media, but we can also see progress on such policy and legal issues as hate crime laws, legal recognition of same-sex relationships and families, the elimination of the military's Don't Ask, Don't Tell policy, anti-bullying laws and programs, and the increasing addition of "sexual orientation" and "gender identity/expression" to non-discrimination laws and organizational policies." [26, p.4].

The very existence of transgender athletes such as: Kye Allums, Schuyler Bailar, Mack Beggs, Harrison Browne, Balian Buschbaum, Willy De Bruijn, Zdeněk Koubek, Andreas Krieger, Chris Mosier, Erik Schinegger, Mark Weston, Alessia Almeri, Mianne Bagger, Parinya Charoenphol, Roberta Cowell, Fallon Fox, Laurel Hubbard (and many others who I have not named in this article) defies the premise of only two sexes or the narration of inborn gender identity. The efforts of transgender sport persons, their advocates and allies allow to push boundaries of acceptance in sport, and let us all hope for the more inclusive

future in sports. As researchers, we are obligated to investigate topics of LGBT issues in sports, conduct further research to improve knowledge of transgender athletes and contribute to more inclusive sport policies in order to fight transphobia in sports.

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